

**Virginia Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability
Strategic Planning Session**



**Richmond, VA
May 18, 2004
Follow Up Report**

I. Introduction

The Governor of Virginia has recognized the need to address interoperability in communities throughout the Commonwealth and has charged the Office of Public Safety and the Office of Commonwealth Preparedness to design a strategic plan for statewide interoperability. The involvement of local and statewide emergency responders is essential to the success of developing a Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan.

The Strategic Planning Session, held on May 18, 2004, brought together key stakeholders and leaders from the local, regional, state, and federal levels to identify key initiatives for public safety communications interoperability in Virginia, based on the local public safety responder perspectives gathered from six regional focus groups. The outcome of the session was agreement on the fundamental cornerstones of the statewide interoperability strategy.

The Strategic Planning Session was designed as a series of conversations centered on the local perspective of communications interoperability, statewide and regional, as it relates to the current state, the case for why change needs to happen, the envisioned future state, and recommended strategies to pursue in achieving the future state.

II. Executive Summary

The Strategic Planning Session on May 18, 2004 provided valuable input to the development of the Statewide Communications Interoperability Strategic Plan. The session resulted in the participants: (1) confirming and providing upgrades to the short-term and long-term strategic initiatives developed through the focus groups; (2) providing recommendations to the proposed mission and vision statements for the Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator, Office of the Secretary of Public Safety; and (3) recognizing the need to more clearly define the scope of public safety and the identified regions.

Top 3 identified key short-term initiatives:

1. Create a method to extract lessons learned from disaster exercises and actual incidents.
2. Develop and distribute a set of public safety communications requirements which include the federal interoperability grant guidance.

3. Leverage existing resources and systems.

Top 3 identified key long-term initiatives:

1. Develop desired outcomes for interoperability, based on stakeholder input, and leverage earmarked funds to localities to achieve the outcomes.
2. Create regional interoperability work groups who have direct representation on the state level Interoperability Working Group.
3. Establish an information and outreach strategy to educate public safety responders, policy makers, and the public on interoperability in Virginia.

Draft Mission and Vision statements:

- To improve the safety of the public in the Commonwealth of Virginia through enhanced data and voice communications interoperability between local, state, and federal agencies.
- Agencies, at the local, state, and federal levels, will be able to communicate at optimal efficiency, in real time, across disciplines and jurisdictions to respond more effectively in their public safety related day-to-day operations and major emergency situations.

III. Detailed Overview

Current State

The objective of the Current State is to affirm the facts and identify the problems related to interoperability in day-to-day activities and mutual aid efforts.

The Strategic Planning Session group validated the following Current State themes, related to Day-to-Day and Mutual Aid interoperability, identified during the six regional focus group sessions:

Local, State, and Federal Coordination:

- Local responders, in general, are not able to effectively communicate with their state level counterparts
- Most communication between local/state and federal agencies is via telephone
- Lack of standards for data systems

- Limited ability to communicate across localities but not with the federal agencies
- Protocols do not support communications between state agencies: lack of awareness and training on system capabilities
- Failure to document lessons learned, across disciplines and jurisdictions, resulting from trainings, simulations, and actual incident responses
- Existing disaster planning protocols and policies are not exercised or reviewed regularly
- Local first responders are not involved in the planning and design of State Agency Radio System (STARS)
- Memorandums of Understanding do not exist between localities or regions and state agencies

Leadership and Politics:

- Local and state level of government leadership do not understand public safety interoperability issues: equipment lifecycle; dynamic and rapidly changing technology
- Resistance to allocating funding for communications system because of high cost associated with supporting the effort
- Failure to budget resources to support implementation and use of new equipment: training, maintenance, implementation, and staff
- Elected officials are not factored into interoperable communications protocols: mayor to mayor
- Funding is not continuous
- Citizen awareness and connectivity across the Commonwealth is sporadic

Existing Resources:

- Data and voice communication is inadequate during large-scale incidents between some responders arriving on an incident scene and the local hospitals
- Existing resources are, and have been, underutilized or not used: Mutual Aid channels
- Numerous and various non-compatible systems exist
- Current interoperability solutions are not affordable or inclusive
- Not all jurisdictions have Statewide Interdepartmental Radio System (SIRS)
- New technology is purchased without adjusting business operations
- Vendors provide proprietary equipment that lack an open architecture

Case for Change

The objective of the Case for Change conversation is to discuss the consequences and implications if changes to Virginia's state of interoperable communications do not occur. The Case for Change statements should appeal to the emotions of individuals and result in action.

The Strategic Planning Session group supported the following Case for Change, identified during the six regional focus group sessions:

- Interoperability is an investment in the lives of our citizens:

- Responsibility of elected officials to invest in the safety of the community: property and lives of the citizens
 - Advanced technology and a regional approach to communication can prevent injury and property damage
- Communications has typically been the first part of the disaster response process to fail; however, it is the most important element for successful public safety response:
 - September 11th changed everything; hundreds of fire fighters lost their lives because they were not able to hear the critical information being communicated by law enforcement
- Regional and Local Threats:
 - Hampton Roads is identified as a top 5 terrorist target
 - Proximity to Washington DC
 - Naval base in Tidewater region
 - International Airport in Northern Virginia
 - Natural disasters: hurricanes, tornadoes
 - Terrain: There is a 9 mile stretch in Southwest Virginia where there are no communication capabilities
- Local Perspective - public safety responders do not have the interoperability capabilities to efficiently and effectively do their jobs:
 - As an officer was pursuing a car on the highway, the suspect moved onto the shoulder of the road. The officer was aware that a sheriff's deputy was positioned on the shoulder further up the highway but was able to communicate directly with the deputy to inform him that the suspect was driving in the shoulder lane. The pursuing officer had to contact his dispatcher, who in turn contacted the deputy's dispatcher, who then contacted the deputy with the information. By the time the data was communicated to the deputy, the suspect had already hit the deputy's vehicle from behind.
- Investing in communications interoperability – technology, planning, procedures, policies - will enable local, state, and federal agencies to communicate directly at the scene and will:
 - Maximize response to any incident by:
 - Better utilizing personnel
 - Increasing interdepartmental awareness
 - Save money by:
 - Reducing maintenance costs
 - Leveraging existing systems and coordination
 - Establish a system that enables the closest unit available to the scene to respond
 - Increase buying power by moving toward a consumer-driven market, rather than vendor-driven
- Liability if no action is taken:
 - Danger to responders – information cannot be shared with other responders in real-time to prevent injury and/or fatalities

- Danger to citizens – inability to receive information in a timely manner to protect themselves during life-threatening disasters and hazards. The responders cannot properly protect the lives of the citizens they serve.

Future State

The objective of the Future State conversation is to discuss what interoperability in Virginia should be.

The Strategic Planning Session group advocated for the following elements of the Future State of communications interoperability in Virginia:

- Extensive education and training for communications interoperability: policies, procedures, and technology
- One common set of standards and procedures that facilitate interoperability
- One universal communications device that routes accurate data to the necessary individuals at the appropriate time
 - Features include: GPS, data, portable radio, cell phone, GIS, direct connect, telemetry, PDA
- Seamless voice and data interoperable communications for the entire public safety community used for local and regional daily incidents and major disasters
- Shared and standardized (clear text) language
- Sufficient and available spectrum dedicated to present and future public safety needs
- Buying, distribution, maintenance and training processes are available through coordinated and/or cooperated contracts

Strategic Initiatives

The purpose of the Strategy conversation is to identify the fundamental strategic initiatives essential to successfully implement a statewide interoperability plan in Virginia.

In validating and providing upgrades to the key initiatives identified during the six regional focus group sessions, the Strategic Planning Session group proposed the following short-term and long-term key initiatives for communications interoperability in Virginia:

Short-Term Initiatives:

1. Create a method to extract lessons learned from disaster exercises and actual incidents.
2. Develop and distribute a set of public safety communications requirements which include the federal interoperability grant guidance.
 - To assist with obtaining funding
 - To inform purchasing decisions
 - To outline interoperability lifecycles
3. Leverage existing resources and systems.
 - Educate public safety responders on availability and proper use of existing technology resources
 - Mandate and monitor the use of existing systems (ie. SIRS and other mutual aid channels)
4. The Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator's Office will assist with the communications and outreach to localities concerning STARS.

Long-Term Initiatives:

1. Develop desired outcomes for interoperability, based on stakeholder input, and leverage earmarked funds to localities to achieve the outcomes.
2. Create regional interoperability work groups who have direct representation on the state level Interoperability Working Group.
 - Extension of the governance model; governed by an executive working group
 - Liaison between and amongst the local, state, and regional representatives
3. Establish an information and outreach strategy to educate public safety responders, policy makers, and the public on interoperability in Virginia.
 - Mutual aid channels that are already in existence: NPSPAC
 - STARS: what is the benefit to locals, what value is added in meeting the needs of the state and local first responders?
4. Develop and utilize cooperative purchasing agreements.
 - Allow for price breaks at the local level
 - Move from a vendor-driven market to a public safety-driven market

5. Develop and adopt plain language protocols (clear text) for all public safety responders in the Commonwealth.

Mission and Vision

The Interoperability Coordinator within the Office of Public Safety presented the Strategic Planning Session participants with a proposed mission and vision for the office. The session participants provided feedback and upgrades which resulted in the following draft mission and vision statements:

Mission – *To improve the safety of the public in the Commonwealth of Virginia through enhanced data and voice communications interoperability between local, state, and federal agencies.*

Additional considerations:

- Define public safety
- Add timeframe

Vision – *Agencies, at the local, state, and federal levels, will be able to communicate at optimal efficiency, in real time, across disciplines and jurisdictions to respond more effectively in their public safety-related day-to-day operations and major emergency situations.*

IV. Next Steps

The key initiatives identified in the Strategic Planning Session, along with data gathered through the six (6) regional focus groups, will serve as the cornerstones of the Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan.

There is a strong commitment to maintain the communication flow between the Commonwealth of Virginia and the participants of the Strategic Planning session and each focus group as the planning for statewide interoperability in Virginia progresses. This report details the conversations and results of the Strategic Planning Session and was distributed to the participants by Monday May 24, 2004. The Interoperability website provides additional informational resources as well as the reports from each regional focus group session. The Interoperability Coordinator invites you to visit the website for regular updates on the progress of the Strategic Plan for Statewide Communications Interoperability.

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